

Resiliency Is Passed From Parent to Child

By Ty Flewelling

I grew up on a farm along “Tornado Alley” in the Mid-Western United States. My childhood occurred long before the days of “Doppler Radar” on your Smart phone or NOA Weather Alert radios. As a young child, I remember muggy afternoons with my father watching the cumulonimbus clouds build on the horizon. He’d say, *“We are in for a tough one tonight.”* On those nights I remember listening to the wind and rain and hail from my small upstairs bedroom. Some nights, my brothers and I slept in the living room; other nights were spent on the storm cellar floor.

As I reflect back upon those stormy nights as a child, they are fond memories. Make no mistake, there were terrifying moments. One particular violent storm brought a tornado within 100 yards of our home. Other storms brought flooding, downed trees, took out power lines and killed livestock, but yet I still fondly remember those times.

One might ask why? The answer is simple: My parents made us feel safe, and warm, and loved. While storms raged above us, my mother would serve us treats, play board games with us by candle light, and snug us into sleeping bags for “indoor camping”. In the morning we would emerge to survey the damage and begin the clean up as a family. This was our norm. As a child, I had a very healthy respect for severe weather, but I also trusted my parents to keep me from harm’s way. I was lucky; I had friends whose parents did not respond to storms in the same manner as my folks. I remember spending the night at a friend’s house when a storm rolled through. During the middle of the night my friend’s parents suddenly rushed into the room where we were sleeping, turned on the lights and declared in a panicked voice that we all had to rush to the basement. There they huddled together in a frightened group screaming and crying with each bolt of lightning. Needless to say I was equally distressed that night, believing that the world had come to an end. Upon emerging from that sleepless night, I found only a wet street, and a couple twigs on the ground; I was amazed by all the fuss!

Fast-forward to Tel Aviv Israel during the summer of 2014. The killings of three Israeli teens by Hamas lead to a 50-day Israel – Palestinian conflict. Mission Tel Aviv came under daily long- range rocket fire. On some days more than 160 rockets were fired across the Nation of Israel from the Gaza strip. Air raid sirens and the thunderous booms of Patriot Missiles taking out in-coming Hamas rockets were heard on a daily basis over all areas in which the Mission community lived and worked. The good news was that the Israeli Iron Dome system worked flawlessly and no one in the Mission community was harmed. That being said, some Mission community members emotionally weathered the conflict better than others.

This is not to say some were distressed while others were not; everyone was distressed by the sirens and loud booms the first few days and the hyper vigilance that resulted throughout the entire conflict. However, as the days turned into weeks, a definite split occurred in the community. Some members of the community settled into the new norm, others did not. While everyone hated the sense of hyper vigilance that came from listening for the next siren, some were able to get on with their lives while others could not. While some were able to create a positive, safe experience for

their families as they moved to their bomb shelters. One family related that they placed “Double-stuffed” Oreo cookies in the bomb shelter and the kids could only have them when the air raid siren went off. At the sound of the next air raid siren, her kids erupted in joyous jubilation as they headed for their shelter. Another placed wine and cheese in her shelter for “stress management”. *(Several neighbors wanted to make that shelter the “community shelter”!)*

Sadly, not all members of the community were able to adapt; weeks into the campaign, some families were still rushing to their shelters and cowering in fear. Counseling was offered, support groups were created and the Regional Medical Psychiatrist called in to support.

In consultation with the families most deeply impacted by the conflict, several points stood out. **1)** Nearly every family was new to the Foreign Service (first or second tour) and thus a nomadic life-style; **2)** None had crisis response experience to draw life lessons from; and **3)** All feared the current crisis was going to leave life-long emotional scars on their family.

The message to these families was this: No family should have to live with rockets raining down upon them. No family should have to live through civil unrest, rioting in the streets, earthquakes, or tornados, but we do. Crisis WILL occur in our lives and in the lives of our family. We cannot change that. What we CAN change, is how we teach our families to react to crisis.